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AUTHOR de Ortego y Gasca, Felipe
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ABSTRACT

Distorted images of American minorities are reflected in all spheres of American life, including academic and public policies. Some specific examples include: (1) Harvard's 1922 quota system for Jews, the university's pattern of white supremacy, and bias in its scholarly research; (2) the relocation of Japanese Americans during World War II; (3) the herding of Native Americans onto reservations; and (4) black slavery. In the case of the Spanish speaking population, racial caricatures are used to portray this minority group in scholarly research and members of the group continue to be inaccurately and superficially represented in literature, movies, TV, and other mass media. Stereotypes and distortions of American minorities must be replaced by positive images which reflect their real worth and their contributions to American life. (Author/EB)

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MINORITIES AND THE QUEST FOR HUMAN DIGNITY

by

Dr. Felipe de Ortego y Gasca

Research Professor of Hispanic Studies and
Director of the Institute for Intercultural Studies and Research
Our Lady of the Lake University of San Antonio, Texas

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I remember, once when I was very young, going to a circus with my Uncle in Chicago. Of all the shows, I was most impressed by the hall-of-mirrors. Unaware of the geometry of the illusion, I remember how awed I was by what seemed to me an infinity of mirrors. For as I looked into them, I could see my image, increasingly reduced, reflected in still more mirrors in seemingly unending reflections in the already reflected mirrors. In another part of the hall-of-mirrors were a number of "funny" mirrors which distorted one's image depending upon how far or near one stood to the glass. I was both amused by and suspicious of the comical and grotesque reflections of myself. And no matter how secure I may have been in the knowledge that the mirrors were just optical pranks meant to engender only good-humored laughter by others or oneself, I could not shake that uneasy feeling about the veracity of the images reflected in those mirrors. Eliu Carranza, the Chicano philosopher, has marvelled at the hall-of-

mirrors phenomenon as the mind seeks "to come to a realization of itself in terms of one distortion after another reflected in such mirrors." Was it possible, I reasoned, that some people actually saw me as I appeared in those ludicrous mirrors? The thought choked off my laughter in mid-stride, as it were. And no longer was I amused. Instead I sulked out angrily, confused and bewildered. Many years were to pass before I understood fully that moment in my life, before I came to fondle it as a great grain of truth revealing to me profundities I am still grappling with. Time and again my thoughts have wandered back to that experience, and each time I've garnered some significant truths, either about myself or the world about me, from that brief and singular moment. And today, as I survey the the existential condition of Chicanos, for example, I wonder if perhaps we are not regarded as those reflections in those mischievous halls-of-mirrors rather than by our true selves. For, standing behind us in those halls-of-mirrors, America has perceived only a monodimensional view of Chicanos, seeing only our distorted faces in those grotesquely distorting mirrors. This has been our lot not only in the Academy but in all other spheres of American life. The distorted im-

ages have thus become the reality; and why we have consequently been regarded more as stereotypes than as people.

But other Americans have also experienced similar treatment, have been equally regarded in terms of mirrored distortions. In 1922, for example, President A. Lawrence Lowell of Harvard University openly called for the school's participation in a quota system for Jewish students, explaining that by doing so he was in fact helping American Jews (emphasis mine). For the presence of too many Jews in higher education, he explained, would only add to the rising anti-Semitism of the time. Other universities, including Dartmouth, also subscribed to the Jews quota. Considerable student sentiment supported Lowell's position, pointing out that Harvard's Anglo-Saxon inheritance made it "the natural segregation place of the Anglo-Saxon" who, after all, "founded this country and this college."

Interestingly, among the signators of a resolution urging approval of the National Origins Act of 1927 were professors Robert de C. Ward (Climatology, Harvard), E. M. East (biology, Harvard) and J. N. Carver (economics, Harvard). I don't mean to suggest that anti-Jewish sentiments were engendered by Harvard alone. Indeed, not! Anti-semitism ran rampant (here and abroad) until well after World War II.

I was reluctant at first to concede that a pattern of white supremacy emerged from a survey of various works on American mi-

norities by Harvard (or Harvard educated) professors and professionals. But the more I probed, the more the pattern surfaced. Naturally, I wondered "Why Harvard?" "Is there some particular environment that promotes this cult of white supremacy at Harvard?—the epitome of American intellectual life." One might stereotypically expect to find such a pattern, say, at a southern or southwestern university or college. Not Harvard!

But why not? One need only look at the staffing pattern of Harvard University to see that it is still (and has been) a "white" university. To be sure, there are professors there like Kenneth Galbraith who are liberal in their interfacings with American minorities—but even Galbraith's presence at Harvard has not changed the "complexion" of the school. And it does not appear that professor Kissinger's presence there will do much for that complexion either.

Be that as it may, Harvard has been singular in abetting the cult of white supremacy which exploits law and learning in its outrageous attacks on American minorities. For example, the Harvard educated historian, Francis Parkman, characterized ambition, revenge, envy and jealously as the ruling passions of the Native Americans. In 1851 he wrote that "the absence of "reflection: made the Indian "grossly improvident" and unfit for "pursuing any complicated scheme of war or policy," concluding that because "he will not learn the arts of civilization . . . he and his forest must

perish together." This contention was advanced further by Nathaniel S. Shaler, a geologist and Dean of Harvard's Lawrence Scientific School, who explained in 1894 that "centuries of experience has thaught us that these folks are, from the point of view of our civilization, essentially untamable" and therefore America ought properly belong to the Anglos and their progeny.

Charles Warren, Harvard-educated and an Assistant U. S. attorney General during World War 1, commented favorably, for example, on the Supreme Court decision which declared the Civil Rights Act of 1875 unconstitutional. This view seems consistent with his anti-immigration views and his participation in the Immigration Restriction League, which he helped found. So too the science which Harvard geneticist Edward East said would "redeem man's hope of Paradise" did not include a redemption of Black Americans. In 1927 he described Blacks as "affable and cheerful but subject to fits of fierce passion," ending with the comment that "we can find no probability that the Negro will contribute heredity factors of value to the white race."

In 1904, the Jew was characterized by Nathaniel S. Shaler (already cited) as avid, aggressive and adroit in seeking "some advantage" from social situations.

Perhaps the most infamous case of ethnic distortion in the United States lies in Executive Order No. 9066, issued by Franklin D. Roosevelt, authorizing the removal and

relocation from California of 112,000 persons of Japanese ancestry on the premise that, because we were engaged in a war with Japan, Japanese Americans might prove to be subversive. We did not relocate German Americans during World War II, although anti-German feelings ran high in the United States during that period. Fearful lest their allegiance be questioned, many German Americans changed their surnames and forbade the speaking of German in their homes just as their predecessors had done during World War I. During the 19th century, equally infamous relocation policies were directed toward Native Americans. Always at the periphery of Anglo American society, Native Americans were herded onto reservations, there to suffer the indignities of poverty and squalor and neglect. But Afro Americans have suffered, perhaps, the most shameful indignity of all: slavery. And continue to suffer indignities because of their negritude and color of skin.

I have touched only lightly on the myriad ills visited upon four distinct minority groups. Indeed, the record of harsh treatment toward these four particular groups is a blight upon the American escutcheon, made more scarlet by the weight of law and learning.

In 1896, for instance, the Supreme Court found in Plessy v. Ferguson that Blacks could be separated from the main-stream of American society provided that separation was reflected in equal facilities. Thus began the infamous "separate but equal" doctrine which Justice Thurgood Marshall referred to in his eloquent decision contra Bakke. In 1901, the Supreme Court ruled that Reservation Indians had no property rights despite treaty guarantees and agreements to the contrary. So, too, the treaty considerations of Guadalupe-Hidalgo (1848) have been abrogated by the United States. That great Chicano educator, George I. Sanchez, put those considerations in focus when (in the Preface to his opus magnum, Forgotten People, published in 1940) he wrote: instead of helping us lift ourselves up by our bootstraps, the United States took away our boots. As recently as 1944, the Supreme Court was less than sympathetic to American minorities when it approved the actions of the United States in relocating Japanese Americans. In his majority opinion, Justice Hugo Black took exception to the petitioner's label of "concentration camp" for relocation centers, arguing that the "exclusion" order was both proper and justified in light of the military dangers presented. Yet

no such exclusion orders were issued for the 58,000 Italian and 23,000 German aliens -- not Italian Americans nor German Americans, but Italian and German aliens -- residing in the United States.

Scholars have been no more sympathetic than jurists to these American minorities. In 1895, the Encyclopedia Americana expostulated that while "the Negro child is on the whole quite as intelligent as those of other human varieties . . . on arriving at puberty all further progress seems to be arrested." And in Heredity and Human Affairs (published in 1927), Edward East, a professor of genetics at Harvard, argued about the genetic inferiority of Negros, an argument taken up by other scholars like Robert Bennett Bean, professor of Anatomy at the University of Virginia. In 1935, professor Bean Wrote that the Negro "lacks reason, judgment, apperception, attention, self-control, will power, orientation, and ethical and esthetic attributes."

Similarly, scholars could turn to the study of Native Americans published by Dr. Daniel G. Brinton in 1891 for proof of the inferiority of Native Americans. The most notorious of these "scholars" was Dr. Thomas R. Garth. In his 1939 study of Race Psychology, Garth

found that while Native Americans were intellectually inferior to whites, their intelligence quotients tended to increase the more "white blood" they had.

Chicanos did not escape the scrutiny of scholars either. During the 20's and 30's numerous articles appeared in various American publications detailing the mental and intellectual inferiority of Chicanos. In 1936, professor S. J. Holmes of the Biology department at the University of California testified that Chicanos showed little evidence of intellectual superiority, pointing out that even after three-quarters of a century there were Mexicans who still could not speak English.

I realize I've painted a grim picture of American race relations. I wish it were otherwise. In this discourse I have not touched on the images of American minorities in American literature nor of their exclusion from the American literary mainstream. That engenders an entirely different discussion. Suffice to say, the record there is equally dismal. In passing, however, let me add an emendation to that record.

Like the British roots in the new American soil, the Hispanic literary roots have yielded a vigorous and dynamic body of literature which unfortunately has

been studied historically as part of a foreign enterprise rather than as part and parcel of our American heritage. To be sure, though, the Hispanic literary tradition has exerted varying influences on American literature, the causes of which Stanley T. Williams suggests stem from the following:

"Within the borders of our nation . . . live almost two million persons who speak Spanish. Some of them are immigrants or the descendents of immigrants from Spain, but another avenue of influence is plain if we remember that more than a million and a half of these Spanish-speaking men and women are in the Southwest, including California. On statistics of this sort it is idle to linger. The facts indicate that the Spanish influences cross and recross each other and that they are primarily three: the direct influence from the Peninsula; the direct influence from Mexico and other countries in this hemisphere; and the indirect influence of these latter regions through the Spanish settlements in our borderlands and the Southwest."

It is in terms of the latter influence, which Williams identifies as "indirect," that the Hispanic works dealing with the Southern and Southwestern parts

of the United States have in fact become the neglected aspect of American literature. For the implication here is that such works are not properly within the traditional Anglo American definition of American literature, and have consequently been neglected save as special studies in the Southwest. This neglect has produced unfortunate literary consequences for Mexican Americans, for they have come to see themselves and their Mexican kinsmen portrayed in our national literature in terms of racial cliches and caricatures.

Like other minority groups Mexican Americans were, and continue to be, inaccurately and superficially represented in literature, movies, TV and other mass media. This has sometimes been due to prejudice, but also to those "well-meaning romanticists," as Ralph Guzman, assistant director of the Mexican-American Study Project at UCLA, calls them, who have seriously distorted the image of the Mexican American for the sake of their art. Mexican-Americans (which include Mexicans) have been characterized at both ends of a spectrum of human behavior (seldom in the middle): as untrustworthy, villainous, ruthless, tequila-drinking, philandering machos or else as courteous, devout and fatalistic peasants who are to be treated more as pets than people. More often

than not Mexicans have been cast as either bandits or loveable rogues; as hot-blooded, sexually animated creatures or passive, humble servants.

As Seymour L. Gross has written a propos of the of the Negro in American literature, "Our understanding of any significant movement in human affairs can hardly be said even to approach completeness until the evidence from literature is in.

In truth, in order to be fully comprehended the ethnic phenomenon of Mexican Americans since World War II must be seen in the more personal context of their literature. What we have seen instead has been the myriad educational, socio-political and socio-economic accounts by Anglo investigators and researchers who can be seriously charged with pursuing at times only the phenomenological chimeras which have come to be represented by the queer, the curious, and the quaint. For, like the Negro, the Mexican American too has been depicted in American literature more as a stereotype than as a human being.

All the abominations I have cited occured during a time when the great concept of the "melting pot" flourished in American thought. As we can see, white ethnics melted. But the "unmeltables" -- the minori-

ties I have focused on -- settled to the bottom of the pot, making their presence known only when rattled in the stirring. Some social theorizers advance the proposition that the melting pot concept was necessary in order to sustain capitalism. Others, that the melting pot concept was a psychological necessity in the making of America. Whatever the reasons underlying the concept of the melting pot, it is a concept of another time. And like the old wood-burning stove, ought to be regarded as a relic of antiguity.

There was little thought given to human dignity in the notions of white supremacy and Anglo-centrism in the making of America. In the rush to "Americanize" our immigrant masses and our non-immigrant tenants, American educational policies hewed to the principles of the common-curriculum and to the thoroughly lexocentric view that to be an American meant speaking only English -- at the expense of languages newcomers to this country brought with them. What a waste of linguistic resources!

Out of the effort to conserve both the linguistic and cultural resources of our people -- of Americans -- arose the concept of "cultural pluralism": that the United States is the sum total of its ethnic parts.

We are a rainbow people -- Black, Red, Yellow, White, Brown -- and the meaning of America must be redefined in terms of these rainbow constituencies. The distorted images of American minorities must be replaced with positive images, assessing their real worth and their real contributions to American life and letters. For they are many. The minority quest for human dignity has been arduous; the path, tortuous. But we shall endure! And we will overcome!